# OF SALT AND SPIRIT

## Black Quilters in the American South

**10.1.25 -1.4.26**

## Gallery Guide

Gustina Atlas (b. 1937), *Variation on Dresden Plate Quilt*, 1998. Cotton; machine pieced, hand quilted, 81 1/2 x 80 inches. Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.13. Photo: Gib Ford

PRESENTED IN MEMPHIS BY

**First Choice Global Sales & Merchandising Group, Cathy Ross, and the Black Art Collective**

MAJOR EXHIBITION SUPPORT FROM

**Burch, Porter & Johnson, LLC; Kroger; Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz; Dr. Linda Tharp; Tanya and Mark Hart; Gloria and Kenneth Boyland; and the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art Staff**

Community Partners

Tennessee Arts Commission

City of Memphis

Hyde Family Foundations

American Alliance of Museums

AutoZone

ArtsMemphis Powering Authentic Assets.

National Endowment for the Arts arts.gov

MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

Roland L. Freeman (1936–2023), *Catherine Gill, Classy Blaylock, Decatur, MS*, 1993. Color print, 24 in. x 36 ½ inches. Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.162. Photo: Gib Ford

## Take Care

**Careful hands / Inside voices / Walking feet / Pencils only**

Caregivers, please stay with your children.
Have fun, look closely, and ask questions about what you see!

# Who was Roland Freeman?

Roland L. Freeman (1936-2023) was among the most significant documentarians of twentieth-century Black life and culture. Shaped by his upbringing and life in rural Maryland and Baltimore, Freeman developed a self-taught approach to visual storytelling that centered the lives of his subjects. Freeman's method of documentation was one rooted in solidarity, particularly in poor and rural communities, emphasizing that the lived experience of the maker could not be disconnected from their work.

Freeman was especially interested in highlighting the range of Black quiltmaking. Drawing from his own early experiences with quilts, he spent nearly thirty years building relationships with Black quilters across the United States, with a special interest in the South. The majority of quilts in this exhibition were collected by Freeman during his travels and represent some of the many Southern quilters he befriended.

**How does your family or community pass down and share memories?**

---

**All exhibitions at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art are underwritten by** the MBMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by Kay Clark and Maggie and Milton Lovell, with generous annual funding from Anonymous, Gloria and Kenneth Boyland, Holly and Paul T. Combs, Deborah and Bob Craddock, Eleanor and William Halliday, Debi and Galen Havner, Sally Hergenrader, James R. Humphreys, Jay and Kristen Keegan, the Doris S. and Hubert Kiersky Charitable Remainder Trust, Carl and Valerie Person, and Bill Townsend.

# Homecoming

***This street is like my grandma's patchwork quilt***
***Kaleidoscope, appliqued with multicolored***
***threads of embroidery.***
***A golden sun, blue skies, carpeted with the green***
***the yellow, the red, the white, the black, the brown, and***
***the checkered.***

— Margaret Walker, "A Poem for Farish Street"

The South serves as a home base for Black folklife. It has sustained cultural heritage across time and space in undeniably magical ways. Over centuries, Black residents have witnessed life-altering transitions from emancipation to Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the continuous fight for civil rights. For those who remained in the South, survival meant resisting and adapting in the face of hardships.

Quilts are a material representation of the memories, legacies, and labor of those who sustained and shaped Black communities. Their squares and seams tell stories—of place, love, loss, and simply existing. Black quilters of the South are the archivists of everyday life. As active observers of their surroundings, they bring together color and composition in their work to create a visual language that speaks to the beauty of Black life.

# The Gathering

***"She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order."***

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The ritual of gathering is one of the most cherished aspects of quiltmaking. From early plantation life to the front porches and kitchen tables of today, quilting circles and bees have remained sacred places for Black quilters to come together. These moments of connection are sites of personal liberation. They allow Black women to forge sisterhood, share resources, and hold space for one another's needs. Historically, Black quilters were often excluded from mainstream guilds because of differences in technique and approach, which were usually tied to race. Thus, Black women formed their own quilting groups as safe spaces for exploration and learning.

Quilting in a cooperative format is also part of a lineage of mutual aid, civic support, and entrepreneurship for Black women across the South. Groups such as the Tutwiler Quilters and Crossroads Quilters (featured in this section) have played a key role in ensuring compensation and creative visibility for Black quilters in Mississippi.

**How do you gather with friends and family?**

**Why is gathering important to you?**

---

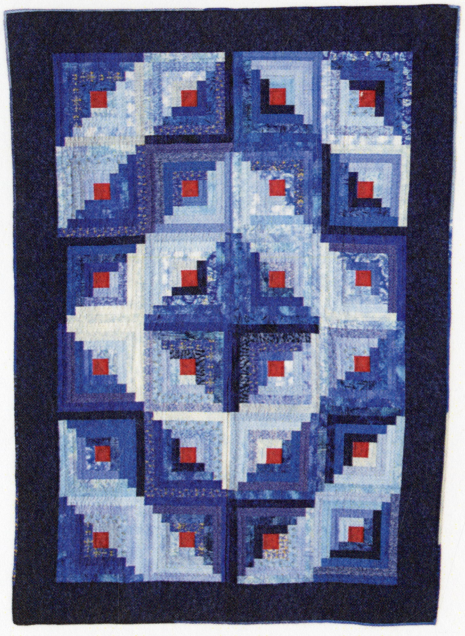
# Aesthetics of Place

***"We are deeply, passionately connected to black women whose sense of aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspire and sustain. We reclaim their history, call their names, state their particulars, to gather and remember, to share our inheritance."***

— bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

Black quilters in the South have faced a complex journey as the interest in their work has ebbed and flowed, as early white scholars often presented their research in a way that removed the quilters' voices. Black researchers and folklorists have spent decades pushing against terms like "improvisation" and "primitivism" and fighting for a more holistic interpretation of the culturally specific aesthetics of Black quiltmaking.

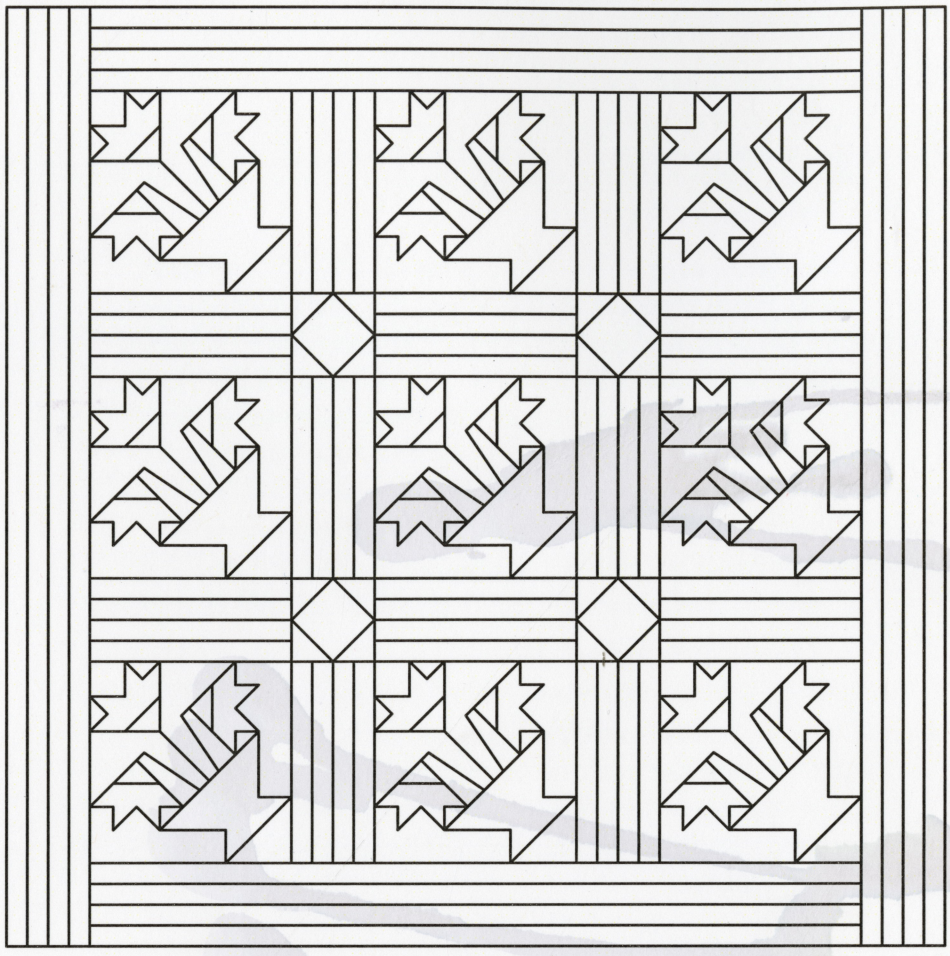
Documentarian Roland L. Freeman was invested in showcasing the depth and breadth of Black quiltmaking. He spent nearly three decades building relationships with Black quilters across the United States, with a special interest in the South. His 1996 book, *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*, was the first significant counternarrative to years of misrepresentation.



Geraldine Nash (b. 1952), *Blue Log Cabin*, 2007. Cotton; hand quilted, 90 1/2 × 64 1/2 inches. Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2008.129. Photo: Gib Ford

**Relax and unwind with some coloring!**

**Use markers, crayons, colored pencils, or whatever materials you like to color in this quilt design featuring the "tulip in vase" pattern.**



# Bound by Love

***"And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read."***

—Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"

Familial ties in quiltmaking extend beyond repurposing articles of family members' clothing. Black women have long gathered with their assigned and chosen families to construct quilts and share stories. Today, it continues to be an intergenerational tradition.

Throughout Roland Freeman's travels, he observed how quilters frequently collaborated. Some makers invoked memories of loved ones through stylistic choices and techniques that originated with their ancestors. In other instances, mothers and daughters morphed into teachers and students, blending their individual creative practices into quilts that showcased years of shared learning. This act of exchanging visual language and familial knowledge represents more than artmaking. It becomes a way of ensuring that home, and its memories and lessons, will not be forgotten.

**Open in Overton Park**

**brooksmuseum.org**

B Memphis Brooks Museum of Art